

zeeva bukai

THE ABANDONING

They were on the beach in Tel-Aviv when they heard the news of Hadas's death. It came over the transistor radio, cutting through the surf and salted air swelling with the gleeful cries of children, the thwack of paddle balls, and ice cream vendors hawking their wares. Salim sank to his knees as the lifeguard's piercing whistle called swimmers back to shore. Tamar drew circles of comfort on his shoulders and whispered that it couldn't be his sister who'd been killed on the bus from Haifa, though like him she had little doubt it was.

In a haze, they gathered their things. Her feet burning as she stumbled after him. His back, half covered in sand, resembled a school map of the Negev desert where she'd gone on a field trip once. The landscape was mountainous and gullied with planes so vast they collided into the sky, into the curvature of the earth. Now her vision tunneled down to one essential point: Salim.

They ran past the water spigot and outdoor showers. They stopped long enough to slip on their sandals and lost their towels along the way. They crossed against the light on Ben Yehuda Street. Cars stopped short, drivers cursed and shook their fists at them. She and Salim charged through the afternoon heat, their breath loud in their ears, their limbs loose, oily with terror.

Salim was the first to reach their apartment on Frug Street. He tried to insert the key into the lock, but it fell out of his hands. She bent to retrieve it. There was sand on his feet, and she brushed it off. He stood in silence waiting for her to finish, his skin quivering beneath her fingers. She opened the door, and he staggered ahead. The rooms were dim. Beads of light leaked through the closed jalousies. They didn't speak. They didn't strip out of their wet bathing suits or run a comb through their matted hair. Salim thrust his legs into a pair of trousers and set out for the police station. Tamar stood on their second story balcony watching his figure recede. She wanted to call him back afraid he would disappear like Hadas, the ground a hungry

mouth that devoured people. When she could no longer see him, she sought between the Bauhaus buildings and found the horizon, a fresh scar separating blue sky from bluer sea. She cupped her hands over her ears and heard the waves collapsing and felt the weight of water on her body, the motion of current and waves, its rhythm steady as a heartbeat. She closed her eyes and saw Salim, his legs sturdy and powerful as she wrapped her legs around his hips, his feet buried to the ankles in silt, their kisses a gentle bumping of teeth and salty tongues, and then their swim to shore, graceful as two seals, their laughter palpating the sky. She tried to recapture those minutes before his fingers adjusted the radio dial and then the beep signaling the hourly report, curdling the day like a spoon of vinegar in a cup of milk.

The kids came home from the Scouts. Ari and Rachel, six and seven, demanded that she look at the city they'd built out of tongue depressors and bottle caps. Ruby, nearly twelve, ran into her room, slamming the door behind her. Could she have heard? Tamar wondered.

"Nice," she walked into the kitchen, not looking at the city Rachel and Ari held between them.

She took bread out of the bin. The serrated knife poised in her hand. Someone had put the chocolate spread in the refrigerator again. Didn't they know the bread would tear if the chocolate was hard? Her chest ached, and there was a prickle behind her eyes. She blinked, waited a beat then sliced the loaf, her hands moving in precise strokes. Tamar licked chocolate off her fingers and cut the sandwiches into squares. She poured milk into their favorite cups.

"What's the matter with your sister?" she asked, bringing Rachel and Ari their snack out to the balcony.

Rachel shrugged. Ari was busy with the puzzle on the table, five hundred pieces of a tragic-faced dog next to an empty garbage can. There was no room for the tray of milk and sandwiches. A crate of blocks was upended on the floor. So much chaos in so little time. She put the tray down on a chair and brushed the hair off her face. There was sand on her forehead. She dragged her fingers across her scalp, scraping the grains up under her nails.

"Don't forget to put those away." She pointed to the blocks. "You don't want people tripping over them." She walked into her bedroom and leaned against the door, hands braced on the wood, head down as she tried to conceive what Hadas's

death would do to them. She had always been there smoothing things over from the moment Tamar married Salim thirteen years earlier. And now Hadas killed one month after the Six Day War, a war they had won. Their bellies still full of *we showed them*. They had danced in the square, convinced the enemy had learned their lesson. She had almost felt sorry for the Arabs who believed that this time they'd walk back into their villages as though nothing had happened, the last twenty years erased.

"Ruby," she banged on the door. "Come out of there."

She heard a muffled, "Leave me alone."

"Please, honey." There was that tight sensation in her chest again, that prickle behind her eyes. Like bees, thoughts of Hadas's children came to mind. The air left her in a great whoosh. She would not think of them, not yet.

"Ruby, get out of there now!"

Her daughter snapped open the door. Her face stony, a high blush on her cheeks, unable to look Tamar in the eye. She had a towel wrapped around her waist.

"What is it? What's the matter?" Tamar's heart thudded.

"I'm bleeding."

"What?"

"Down there."

Dumbly, Tamar looked on the tiled floor and saw the crumpled heap of her daughter's shorts and underwear spotted with blood.

"Oh," she held back a laugh. "I thought it was something terrible, that you were ill, or hurt." She pulled Ruby into an embrace and for one moment felt all of her daughter's gangly body lean in; she smelled the sun in her hair, the slight musk of iron and salt on her skin, and then her hands and elbows jabbing, pulling away, until she had no choice but to let her daughter go.

"You're hurting me," Ruby said.

"I'm sorry."

"What do I do now?" she looked defiant and forlorn.

"Wait here." Tamar returned a few minutes later with a sanitary pad. She wanted to say something encouraging about womanhood and motherhood, just as her mother had done, but she couldn't pry the words from her brain. What bad timing, she thought, for Ruby to shed her childhood. Tamar patted her on

the shoulder, “You’ll be all right,” and then ashamed of her inadequate response, returned to the kitchen.

For the rest of the afternoon, she startled anytime someone climbed the stairs. She ran to the door and listened for Salim’s footsteps. She heated chicken stew for dinner, added more potatoes and carrots, cut a vegetable salad, presumed that Moti, Hadas’s husband and their children, Tehila and Barak would be dining with them that night and maybe every night thereafter. She set the table, took out the cloth napkins she used for holidays and special occasions, then thought better of it and put them away. She wondered whether anyone would have an appetite and remembered their weekly get together was planned for tonight the four grown-ups, the five children. The evening was to have passed like many summer nights in easy camaraderie, games of backgammon, a cream-filled refrigerator cake, and the music of Naomi Shemer and Arik Einstein on the Victrola. Hadas would sing along clapping her hands, urging the rest of them to join in and when Tamar did, her voice full and bell-like, the others stopped to listen. Salim would smile at her in a way that made her skin clamp onto bone. She’d squeeze Hadas’s hand in gratitude, knowing that her sister-in-law had given her that moment to shine.

Salim came home hours later. His face ashen, his expression grim. “My sister,” was all he said, the crack in his voice a canyon of grief.

“I’m so sorry,” she buried her face in his neck. They stood like that for a long time, his arms at his sides, her body wrapped around his like a vine. He broke away, and she felt something small and fragile collapse between them. After he showered, she ladled out a plate of stew. He ate, dipping and lifting his fork mechanically, dragging strips of bread through gravy, filling himself until it was difficult for him to take a deep breath, his belly distended. His eyes focused on a point beyond her; she asked if he’d had enough. He looked at her as though she’d shaken him out of a stupor.

“I saw Moti,” He lit a cigarette. Smoke escaped out the sides of his mouth. Under the florescent light his face was leached of color, giving him a greenish under-the-sea pallor.

“How is he?”

“Broken,” he said.

“Will they come for a meal?”

“No.” He blew a series of smoke rings. She removed the plates from the table and wiped down the counter. Laughter drifted past their window. Chaim, their neighbor, called to his wife, Yaffa. “Keys,” he bellowed from the street. A moment later they crashed to the pavement below.

“Should I take them something?” She filled the feenjon with water and measured out two scoops of Turkish coffee and sugar.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

She took the coffee off the stove before it came to a boil. In the first weeks of her marriage, Hadas had taught her to make coffee the way Salim liked it, strong and sweet. She had come to their marriage knowing little about Levantine cuisine. The tastes in her family ran toward European fare like chicken schnitzel and stuffed cabbage. Salim’s sister had proven a good teacher and an even better storyteller. Hadas had told her about the family’s journey across the Golan Heights when Salim was ten and Hadas was eight, how their parents settled first into a kibbutz where no one spoke Arabic, and then in a run-down bungalow in south Tel-Aviv where most everyone did, and how in Syria Salim fought boys who called him *Yehudi maloun* a dirty Jew, and in Israel, *aravi masriach*, a stinking Arab. Sometimes Tamar wondered if he would have married her if she was an Arab Jew, or if what attracted him to her was that her parents were Ashkenazi and she was born in Israel.

Tamar poured the coffee into a glass; a thick layer of foam rested on the surface. From now on she would be preparing the holiday meals alone. There would be no more laughter as she and Hadas stuffed grape leaves and zucchinis, baked rose scented pastries. Hadas’s hand delicate and sure, her praise welcome, a balm that stilled Tamar’s self-doubt.

They decided to wait until morning to tell the kids about Hadas.

“Let them sleep as children tonight,” Salim said.

She fed them their dinner, made sure Ari and Rachel showered, tucked them into bed and read a story about a snail who befriended a bear. The pulse in her temple throbbed.

At nine o’clock Ruby said, “I’m going to bed.”

“What about the scouts meeting? Movie night at the center. I thought you wanted to go.”

Ruby traced a floor tile with the heel of her foot. “No.”

Tamar followed her into the bedroom she shared with Rachel and Ari, “Why not?” She pitched her voice low so as not to disturb the children.

“They’ll all know about me.”

“How?”

“Mira will tell them. She saw me in the bathroom wrapping a wad of toilet paper. She guessed.” Ruby’s voice climbed. “She can’t keep a secret. Not for money or anything.”

“Sshh.” Exhaustion weakened Tamar’s resolve. The night light threw a fist-sized orb on the wall, casting Ruby in shadow. She couldn’t see her daughter’s face but was aware of the tremble in her lips. Outside, footsteps echoed on the street, and in the distance, the surf sounded like it was breathing. “Fine honey, do what you want.”

She could feel Ruby’s shock in the way she caved in the middle, as though taking a blow. If it were any other day Tamar would have cajoled her into going to the scout meeting, making light of Mira’s loose tongue. She’d have told her the girls that hadn’t gotten a visit from their “monthly friend” yet would be envious, and the boys would be in awe, but Tamar couldn’t summon the energy it would take to persuade Ruby to face what awaited her. There were still the funeral arrangements to complete, Hadas’s children and husband to visit, and besides, maybe it was time her daughter learned to stand up for herself, face girls like Mira down.

She went out to use the public phone, her change purse jangling with *asimonim*, telephone tokens. She was surprised at how easy it was. The police had already released the body to the burial society. Two phone calls and everything was taken care of. The funeral was scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, a graveside service at 3:00pm at the cemetery in Holon. For a few more lira they would post an obituary on the advertisement columns throughout the city, informing people of Hadas’s death and place of burial and *Shiva* arrangements. How much easier it was to die here than to live, she thought.

She walked the few blocks to Hadas’s apartment. The evening was warm; a breeze rustled through the trees and lifted her hair off her face. She was glad now that she’d forgotten to tie it back, enjoying the sense of freedom it gave her. Dizengoff Street was crowded. Pedestrians meandered up and down the sidewalk, some

cracking sunflower seeds, letting the shells fall to the ground. Vendors sold warm peanuts, spicy chick peas, and triangles of coconut floating in ice water. People sat in outdoor cafes drinking coffee and eating cakes, laughing and talking, holding hands. One woman took out a compact and applied lipstick; a couple kissed full on the mouth. Young men wolf-whistled at girls walking by. Soldiers made their way home with rifles hanging off their shoulders. Traffic was dense; cars honked and Vespas with sidecars weaved in and out of lanes. The street pulsated with life, and she couldn't help feeling a sense of relief that she was alive too. She hurried across the road to where the streets were quieter, darker and no one could see the momentary joy in her face.

Cool air collected under the sycamore trees whose air roots dangled like swing ropes. She turned right onto King Solomon Street and smelled the jasmine trees that grew in the front gardens of the Bauhaus buildings and looked up to find window boxes overgrown with dahlias. She loved this block. Like Frug Street, it was built in the 1930's when Tel-Aviv was the most modern city in the world. She reached Hadas's building and pressed the light switch in the hall, taking the stairs two at a time to the second floor, straining to reach the apartment before the lights went out. Tamar gave a soft knock on the door, not wanting to wake Barak, certain he was asleep by now.

"Who's there," Tehila's voice was distant, adult like. She opened the door, and Tamar pulled her into an embrace, kissed both cheeks, and stroked her face.

"How are you sweetheart?" feeling the girl stiffen in her arms.

"Shhh. Abba is asleep; he took a pill."

"Where's Barak?" Tamar asked.

"Next door with his friend, Ilan. He's spending the night there."

"Will you be okay? Do you want to come home with me?"

"Abba needs me here," Tehila said.

Tamar felt a pinch in her heart. Mere hours after Hadas's death, and Tehila was already slipping into the role of caretaker. She knew Moti well enough to know that he'd accept the child's efforts without question, believing it his due. Salim would see it the same way; Tamar prayed she would live a long life, so neither Ruby nor Rachel would have to serve their father, clean his house, wash his clothes, and prepare his meals. Now that Moti's wife was dead, his daughter was expected to step in until she

found a husband and even then, Moti would continue to rely on her unless, Tamar frowned, he found a replacement and married again. That was a possibility. Moti was not yet forty-three, only a few years older than Salim.

“I’ll only be a minute,” Tamar said. “I need to leave your father information about the funeral arrangements. Got a pen and paper?”

Tehila retrieved a pad from her bedroom. “I’ll see that he gets it in the morning.”

“You’re a good girl,” Tamar said. “You have what to eat?”

Tehila shuddered. “Ima cooked before she left this morning, but I can’t eat it. I put it in the freezer.”

She embraced Tehila again, angry at herself for not being able to give the girl something more substantial, and though Tehila relaxed in her arms, even allowed Tamar to rock her, she felt the inadequacy of the gesture. More than once today, she experienced that awful sense of not being enough, of not having enough to give. She tried to shake it off, telling herself she just had to work harder, but a part of her was already retreating to a safe distance, something Hadas would never have been guilty of. To her sister-in-law, living life meant being fully present and engaged; for Tamar, it was enough to watch the pageantry from a distance.

It was nearly eleven when Tamar arrived home. The apartment was dark and silent, but she could hear Yaffa, her next-door neighbor, preparing tea. The kettle whistled and rattled on the stovetop. Someone had their radio on; an old song played that made Tamar’s throat ache with nostalgia. She listened to the soft hiss of car wheels on Frishman Street, the lonely strike of footsteps on the pavement, felines caterwauling near the garbage bins. These sounds were familiar; they were home.

On the kitchen table, she found a copy of the preliminary police report and realized someone from border patrol must have dropped it off while she was gone, a courtesy to Salim who worked for TAAS, the IDF Military Industries. After a quick shower, she wrapped herself in a towel and brought the file with her into the bedroom, worried one of the kids would find it in the morning. Salim lay on his back, staring at the moon spilling through the half-closed jalousie. Tamar let the towel drop and snuggled against him.

“I saw the report.”

“They found her killer,” Salim said.

They peeled oranges and fed them to each other. Tamar heard them say, *remember this sweetness*, rubbing their hands in the dirt, sniffing the rich soil.

“I hadn’t gotten that far. Where?”

He was so quiet she thought he’d fallen asleep.

“Sheik Munis.”

“My god.” Her breath seized at the mention

of the abandoned Arab village. She, Salim, and Hadas had lived there a dozen years ago in a stone house with a blue door. The village had winding streets and alleyways where dogs hid from the sun, surrounded by acres of *pardesim*, citrus groves that perfumed the air. On cool winter nights when the ground was dry, they watched from the window Arab villagers returning to the groves to harvest

what was left of their fruit. They brought their children. They carried ladders, wood crates, and pruning shears. They ate beneath the trees. They peeled oranges and fed them to each other. Tamar heard them say, *remember this sweetness*, rubbing their hands in the dirt, sniffing the rich soil, wiping it on their vests and pant legs, carrying home a little bit of the earth they’d lost. Come dawn they disappeared like ghosts in the morning fog.

Before each harvest season, Hadas hung sprigs of rosemary and lavender in the doorways and windows to keep spirits out. She invited a rabbi to check and bless the mezuzahs in the house, though she told Tamar she feared nothing would rid Sheik Munis of its ghosts, except razing the place to the ground, and even then, she wasn’t sure they’d leave.

The police report stated that Hadas had been on the #76 bus out of Haifa where she had visited her cousin Bidriya, who six months earlier had escaped from Damascus to Beirut and then to Israel. Hadas had sat near a window at the front of the bus. The report said that if she’d sat in the back she could have hidden under a row of seats and perhaps been saved. Tamar wondered how long it took a woman weighing fifty-six kilos, carrying a leather handbag and a slim volume of Natan Alterman’s poems to duck. Ten seconds, twenty, a minute? Surely longer than a bullet. The police said the incident could have been much worse. Only three people were killed: the driver, the ticket collector and Hadas. The other passengers had

either disembarked before the University stop where the killer had gotten on, or were saved when he panicked and escaped into the ruins of Sheik Munis.

They told the children after breakfast, giving them only the vaguest descriptions: *killed by a gun man. Yes, they caught the man. Nothing anyone can do.* Not even Ruby who always demanded the details of a story asked for more information. For the moment, it was enough to know that Hadas was gone. They didn't need to contemplate what her final thoughts were, or where and how the gun man was caught, or what loss meant, how it was an acid that ate through stone, or a frozen sea cracking under the weight of a pebble.

On the day of the funeral the sun swelled into every corner of the sky. Mourners and attendants wilted under it. Sweat stained their shirts and glistened on their faces. Tamar greeted Bidriya who remained outside the gates of the cemetery, fearing the jealous dead would steal her son. She was a petite woman. Her black hair was covered in the green silk kerchief Hadas had given her. She cradled her baby against her breast, a feverish glow to her eyes and called to Salim with a keening wail. He pulled her into his arms; the baby cocooned between them. They spoke in rapid Arabic, and Tamar felt, as she did when he and Hadas had spoken Arabic, like a foreigner in her own country. Speak Hebrew, she'd say to them, and Hadas would lay a hand on her shoulder, "Sorry, we forgot ourselves." Tamar would give them a hollow smile, dismayed that when they spoke in their mother tongue, they seemed to be their truer selves. It struck her like a tidal wave that on this primal level they were unknowable, separate from her, hidden from her. *Salim was hidden from her.* She felt this threat to her life in a visceral way, alternately clinging to him and retreating from him as though frightened to live without him and equally frightened to live with him, a tension that was in itself a kind of drug. She threaded her arm through Salim's, and he withdrew from Bidriya's embrace.

While everyone followed the prayers, Tamar lost focus. Her intentions scattered like ashes in a gust of wind, especially when she saw Tehila and Barak. They looked at the casket as if they expected their mother to lift the lid and call the whole business off. Barak was eight and unnaturally stoic. She wondered if he'd been coached to act like a man, but just as it seemed that he had full control of himself, his face collapsed

into tears and Tehila who appeared to have matured overnight, held him until he collected himself. Moti, Hadas's husband, was a block of stone in a folding chair. Salim had to physically lift him up for the mourner's *Kaddish*, and then Moti fell to his knees like a statue that had toppled in the sand. *Ozymandias*. The Shelley poem came to her, about a King who thought himself invincible. Moti had just been made regional manager of Bank HaPoalim. He'd boasted about it the week before. Hadas had rolled her eyes and said, "Sweetie, I'm proud of you, now shut up and eat."

In the days to come Tamar found herself at the bus depot unable to board a bus. She felt she was marking time until the next disaster. She forgot what she did the day before, the memory lost as though 24 hours in which she took care of her children, prepared meals for Hadas's family, hung the laundry to dry, washed the floor, shopped for groceries, watered the flowers on the balcony had never occurred. Grief was its own terrain, a land of sinkholes. There didn't seem to be a solid place to put her feet. Everywhere she looked there was Hadas, in the faces of her children, her husband. She eventually cried, but Salim remained dry-eyed throughout the seven days of mourning in Hadas's apartment. The family sat on boxes, the mirrors were covered, friends and family arrived with platters of food, and all the talk was in hushed tones. Prayers were muttered and sung, and Hadas's soul was implored to leave the house and rise to its new home.

A few nights after the *Shiva*, she woke to find Salim sobbing. The sound was like a landslide, trees torn out by the roots, houses crumbling to the ground. He wept crouched on their bedroom floor. She tried to comfort him.

"Touch me and I'll break," he said as if mourning had turned him to glass. It was nearly dawn before he came to bed. He climbed on top of her, raised her nightgown, pulled her knees up and entered her. His eyes were closed, his head turned aside like he was listening for something. She grabbed hold of his hair in both fists and kissed his mouth hard, tasting blood. He opened his eyes and saw her there beneath him. Only then did he take her night gown off, kiss her neck, her lips and sigh when her breasts pressed against his skin, the heat rising off their bodies slick with sweat, their movements slow, deliberate, only then could he sleep.

In the aftermath of Hadas's death, Tamar worried what would become of them. The change in their lives resembled the slow shift of tectonic plates beneath the

earth's surface, gradually pulling them apart. Salim was less talkative and quick to anger. He fell into brooding. The kids were frightened by his mercurial moods and Tamar felt she was sidestepping land mines and building rope bridges to accommodate him and the children.

Then there was her own grief. Late at night images of Hadas came to her. Hadas on the bus, looking out at the sea, the turquoise waters easing the tightness from her shoulders. She saw the bus arrive at the intersection of Derech Haifa and Rechov HaUniversita on the outskirts of Tel-Aviv. A man climbed on board. His shoes were dusty. No one saw the gun until it was too late and then there was the shot, a loud report that caused Tamar's body to jerk against the bed, like in a dream about falling. Hadas was beautiful with her black eyes and skin the color of pale earth. The small bullet hole in her brow resembled a bindi. Blood flowed out the back of her head, a crimson scarf pooling on the seat.

"Sheik Munis," she said like it was a prayer. Like it was a sin.

Tamar couldn't let go of the idea that they had lived in the gun man's house, and that he had recognized Hadas when he saw her on the bus as one of the intruders wandering through his rooms, pattering in his garden, sitting beneath his favorite lemon tree, and decided right then to kill her. Tamar asked Salim if he'd thought of that possibility. He was furious and called her a fool and said there was no Sheik-Munis, at least not anymore and that when people abandoned their homes they got what they deserved.

"Maybe they were forced out?" She remembered those villagers returning each year to harvest their fruit.

"What does it matter now?"

"Why would anyone leave their home?"

"Because they have no choice," he shouted, "because they have to go on living even when they lose everything."

She raised her palm to his cheek, "Please don't blame yourself." He sprung back as if he'd been slapped. "You couldn't have known what would happen, what that man would do."

He looked down at his shoes. "I have to go to Moti. See you later."

She was certain that he felt responsible for his sister's death, not because they had lived in Sheik Munis, but because he was the one who told Hadas to visit their

cousin Bidriya, and she had listened because he was her older brother and more of a father to her than the gruff man who came home on weekends from the docks in Haifa until one day he didn't and because their mother barely raised them, too busy cleaning the houses of wealthy Ashkenazim on her hands and knees. Mostly, it was because a few months earlier Bidriya had snuck across the Lebanese border into Israel by boat. Seasick, pregnant, her husband imprisoned, accused of being a Zionist spy, Bidriya deserved to have family around her.

Tamar saw their lives as one long chain of ironies.

On the morning after the *shloshim*, the first thirty days of mourning, Salim shaved his bereavement beard. He ate a hearty breakfast and gathered Tamar and the children in the living room. The sun shone on the balcony and from outside came the chirping of birds and the rumbling of Tnuva trucks carrying milk down Frishman Street.

"I've come to a decision," he said in that voice he used when he'd settled something in his mind, and there was no turning back. Tamar felt the muscles in her face tighten into a mask. "We're going to New York City."

"What?" Tamar said.

"Five years that's all I need. I'm going to make barrels of money, enough to buy a villa in Herzaliya on the beach when we return."

Ari and Rachel jumped up and shouted, "Yay!"

Ruby's face paled. "I can't go. How can I leave Tehila now?"

"Your father's joking." Tamar folded her arms across her chest. "Ruby, take the kids into your room. I want to talk to Baba alone."

Salim walked into the kitchen. Tamar followed him. She cleared the table of breakfast dishes.

"If you're worried that I won't get a job, I already have something lined up. Foreman in a plastic's factory."

Tamar lowered her voice, "You're not thinking rationally. This is your grief talking."

"Rational? How rational is it for a woman to be shot dead on a bus? Hasn't this taught you anything? People want to kill us here. For what? Land? A house? We can get that anywhere." Salim said.

"Sshh. You'll scare the children." She poured dish detergent onto a sponge.

“I’m scared for my children. For us.”

“Five years, ten years won’t change the fact that Hadas is dead.” She ran the water in the sink.

He pulled her close. His hands rested on her hips. “You’re right.” He spoke into her hair. “Nothing will change here, except that we’ll have distance, maybe some clarity and plenty of money.”

“How can you think of leaving Moti and the kids? They need us now.” She placed her hands on the counter. “We need them.”

“I’ve already spoken to Moti. He understands. Wait and see, they’ll follow us. He as much told me so. We’ll all come back rich.”

“Are you crazy? Hadas would never agree to this. I love our life here. This is our home.”

“Your home, your birthplace, not mine, not Hadas’s. Think Tamar, how much of that good life was due to Hadas? She was the one who planned all the parties, the outings, the picnics in the park. She was the glue. You, me, the kids, that’s our life now.” He stepped back, lit a cigarette, and flung the spent matchstick into the ashtray.

Her stomach cramped, and the taste of metal was strong in her mouth.

“I swear on Hadas’s soul,” he said, “five years and enough money to hold our heads up and then we’ll come back. You always wanted to live on the beach. I can give you that.”

“We live a few blocks from the beach now.”

“No, I mean really on the beach. Private, a villa in Herzaliya. Imagine that. Where the rich live.” He walked from one end of the living room to the other and back. Tamar could feel the tension rolling off him. His hands trembled with excitement.

“But we don’t know anyone in New York. What about the children? A new language, schools?” She was finding it hard to catch her breath.

“They’ll come back speaking English, have an American education. Doors will open for them. They’ll be Kings and Queens here.”

“What are you talking about? When has that ever mattered to us? We want them healthy, happy, right?” She opened the refrigerator and stared at the contents.

He gently shut the door, “Tamar,” and turned her around. He kissed her eyelids

one at a time and in a tone of infinite patience said, “We have to get out of here if we’re to survive.”

“You mean you have to.”

He let her go and gave the chair leg a soft kick. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you saying?” A rhetorical question because she could read in his face, in his body the decision he’d come to. “I’m not leaving our home because your sister died.” She bumped up against the refrigerator, trapped. “What you’re asking is too much.”

“This country is haunted.” His face was stark; the expression turned inward. “My sister is just one among many. There will be more dead.”

“What are we Arabs now? Ignorant superstition is going to rule us? For that you want to ruin our lives?”

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the sweat off his brow. “You seem to forget that I’m an Arab.” For the first time in their married life he looked at her in disgust. He picked up his wallet and cigarettes and without another word left the house.

She ran to the door. “Salim,” his name echoed through the halls. He continued to descend the stairs without turning back. His keys on the kitchen table.

That night, with a cup of tea at her side, she waited for Salim on the balcony. The street lamps turned on at sunset, and in the early hours of the evening there was a steady flow of traffic. At ten o’clock people milled out of the Cameri theater on the corner of Dizengoff and Frishman. Laughter lifted into the trees and then there was the gradual dying out of sound, so that after midnight all that was left were the echoing footfalls of a few pedestrians going home, the rush of a faucet being turned on, the shutting of radios, the final click of a refrigerator door, and then a slumbering silence followed, so complete she was sure she was the only person awake in her beloved city. She watched the shades of night go from light to dark to light again. Street lamps extinguished at the first hint of a grey dawn.

She had never realized how raucous the birds were, or the way the sky turned purple before the moon dropped into the horizon and in its place rose a blushing sun, or how the palm trees looked like giants at a gathering. The junk merchant’s wagon creaked as it plodded down the road, the horse’s hoofs like the beat of a darbuka drum. At 5:30 the garbage trucks groaned to a stop and then there was the

slap and crash of bins and the stink of garbage wafting up as the trucks drove on. She catalogued each sound and scent of the Tel-Aviv morning.

After a night without sleep adrenaline, like electricity, coursed through her. She tried to pretend that it was a normal day and prepared breakfast for the kids before they went off to the Scouts. Ruby was on her way to a two-night stay in Ein Gedi. Tamar stuffed a pita with hard boiled eggs and hummus for the trip and filled a canteen with ice water. She kissed the children goodbye and held onto them for an extra minute. No one asked where Salim was; they believed he'd gone to work early. After they left, she went into her room. The empty bed, an accusation. She whipped open the closet and tore Salim's clothes out, then went through each dresser drawer and did the same. Thoroughly spent, she crawled into their bed and pulled his clothes over her. She held them, buried her face in them until she succumbed to sleep.

When she woke, she washed her face and then went to see Moti, certain that Salim was there, close to Hadas and her family, but no one knew where he was. By the end of the second day, she couldn't eat or drink. It was like mourning again, only this time for the living. She walked to the police station. People stared at her in the street, and when she caught their eye, they turned away. Theirs faces full of questions and dread as though she carried some awful contagion. The police officer took pity on her and checked his files to see if anyone meeting Salim's description had been arrested, or involved in an accident. When the kids came home, she took Rachel and Ari to her mother's house and asked if they could spend the night there. Miriam, her mother, frightened her by saying that in Poland she had seen people lose their minds with grief. She wondered if it was she who was losing her mind, or if Salim had lost his.

On the third day, reluctant to go back to the police and finding the wait at home intolerable, Tamar got on a bus. She sat in the last row where it would be easy to duck behind the seats in front of her if a gun man boarded. Her hands gripped the rail, and she reminded herself to breathe. To her relief, the ride was uneventful. The radio beeped the news hour, and she listened to a report about a skirmish in Gaza on the Egyptian border, the first since the war. She looked out the window at the buildings and cafes, at the signs that read for sale, or for rent, at people eating shwarma and reading the paper, at life going on.

She got off at the intersection at Derech Haifa and Rechov HaUniversita and walked up the hill that led to Sheik Munis. Much of Sheik Munis had been

demolished to make room for Tel-Aviv University, a planetarium, and a Luna Park, but there were still acres of *pardesim* laying fallow and stone houses, a few intact, most with roofs and walls missing. The three wells used to irrigate the orange groves and furnished the village with clean water were destroyed. There were no street signs, no roads, only dirt paths. She plucked an orange from a tree and ripped open the peel. Her fingers and chin were sticky as she sucked the juice, surprised by its bitterness.

The afternoon was cooling now, and a breeze blew through the *pardes*, stirring the waxy leaves. Weeds and thistles grew around the trunks and foot paths. She walked a long distance before coming to the stone house with the blue door that Hadas had painted each year to keep the evil eye out. In the garden, there was a lemon tree and a wood bench. A brass urn rested in the dirt beside a shovel. A garden wall was torn down. The stones were in a neat pile. She opened the back door and walked into the main room, knowing this was why she had come. Salim was there. He sat on their favorite window ledge, looking out at the orange groves. His hair uncombed, his face unshaven. Orange peels littered the floor.

“Salim?” For a moment, she feared he was part of her imagination and then he opened his hand and said, “Hadas.” There was a sprig of dry rosemary tied in a velvet ribbon in his palm.

“Yes.”

“I miss her,” he said.

“I know. Me too.”

“She was my sister, but she was also like my mother and my daughter, and I was like her father and her son. Can you understand that?”

Tamar placed a hand on his shoulder and felt the muscles shift beneath her. The house smelled like the winter rains had never dried, and of small furred animals that had burrowed there.

“This place is full of ghosts now.” Salim said, “They can take it apart stone by stone, raze it to the ground and nothing will change.”

Three days of fear washed over her as she imagined a life without him. Her bones felt like salt, her tongue like ash. She pressed her face to his chest.

“All right, we’ll go to America. Five years. No villa in Herzilya, just our apartment. We keep our apartment, and then we come home as if nothing has

changed, as if we'd never left."

He ran his fingers through her hair, "Okay" and kissed her mouth. "We keep the apartment."

The next morning, they dressed carefully: he donned the only suit he owned, the one he married in, and she wore high heels and her best navy skirt. They collected their passports and birth certificates and walked the few blocks to the American Embassy on HaYarkon Street where they applied for the visas that would change their lives. From their spot on a long line next to an open window Tamar saw the sea, a vast blue sheet rippling in the sun. Her breath caught at the sight of it. Beach umbrellas fluttered in the breeze. People swam and rode the waves. Others picnicked on blankets. The ice cream vendor trudged across the sand, shouting flavors into the air. Children played in the surf, their laughter folded into the waves. *Remember this sweetness.*

Salim took hold of her hand. "Come on," he said, "they're calling our names." 🕒